

THE DUEL.

BY ELEANOR M. INGRAM.

In which the race leads up to and over the Great Divide, and the victory is to the swift.

THE first time Louis Delmar saw it, was when he came down the paddock from his own tent, in the ruddy sunset light.

A long, low, black racing car, sullenly powerful in every massive line, it crouched rather than stood before its control, awaiting the contest soon to commence. Among the other machines ranged down the row each before its tent, some masking strength with foreign grace of outline, some bright with color and shining metal or stripped to an athlete's lightness, this one showed a dark alien.

Round the other cars swarms of mechanics vibrated; this one stood untouched and self-sufficient.

The knot of onlookers drew back respectfully before the young driver, famous in motor-racing circles in spite of his scant twenty-three years; a slight, straight figure in his close-fitting khaki uniform with across the shoulders the name of the car he drove.

"What do you think of it, Delmar?" ventured a mechanic, who sat before the tent in a camp-chair.

"It's a beauty," was the terse reply. "What have you done to your arm?"

The man glanced down ruefully at the bandages.

"I'm out of the races; some one else has got to go with Laurence. The jack slipped an hour ago and the car caught me as it fell."

"That's the third it's sent to the hospital, since we brought it here this morning," observed another.

Before Delmar could answer, the driver of the black car came quietly out of the tent and passed an arm about his shoulders.

"I thought you weren't coming over," he chided, in caressing reproach. "I thought we'd be called to practise before you got here."

The other smiled a little, but made no defense.

"You wanted me to flatter your machine,

Laurence? It's the fastest thing on the course, they tell me."

"Oh, it's fast," Laurence conceded without enthusiasm. "If you win, it will be by good driving or because an accident puts us out. But I'm glad you're not driving with me."

"You're glad!"

Before the sparkling astonishment and raillery of his glance, Laurence's dark young face lightened to a smile, but without altering in meaning.

"I'm glad you're driving another car, and not team-mate with me on this one," he repeated deliberately.

"Why?"

A man had come up while they were speaking and had busied himself with attaching the row of red tail-lights across the rear of the car, in readiness for the night race.

As Delmar put his question, there was the sharp clink of breaking glass, a cry of pain, and the workman rose with his right hand dripping blood from a long cut.

"The machine lurched," he explained, as the others sprang forward. "I was looking on the lamp when she lurched down and broke the thing against my hand. If I had a rag—"

"You'd better go over to the doc," advised Delmar, already binding a handkerchief about the wound. "Some of you go with him, boys, and get him fixed up. The car can't be braked, Laurence."

"Oh yes, it is," Laurence contradicted. "That's the fourth man it's hurt to-day. Yesterday when Rivers—who's driving with me—had it out on the track, it skidded into the fence and wrenched his shoulder, so he's sore yet. And it brings a record list of accidents from the factory. Don't you see how the men keep away from it when no repairs are needed?"

Delmar turned to look at him, his own expression a compound of emotions.

"Why, Laurence!"

"I'm not crazy, Delmar. That machine is blood-hungry. The race isn't even started yet; Heaven knows what it will do before the finish. I know what you think—"

Delmar's clear laugh rang out across the sentence.

"Think? I think you've been dining on the junk over there in the grand stand—I think you've given yourself a melancholy dyspepsia. Come, confess; you've done what we did at the last Beach race: lived on chunks of bad pie snatched at intervals, until you believe in hoodoo cars and devil machines."

"Perhaps."

"Perhaps? Certainly. Your mechanics have been clumsy, no doubt; and as for Rivers, I told him he'd break his neck, if he didn't mind his curves better. Walk down to my place with me; you need a change, and the track won't be ready for half an hour."

"I was afraid you wouldn't get here to laugh at me," said Laurence slowly. "The sight of you would recharge a battery, as George said the last time you were out. I guess I have been queer, since I've been driving this thing. I'll come, but not to your tent; I want you to meet some one over on the grand stand."

Delmar fixed his long-lashed, singularly translucent eyes upon his companion; eyes of brilliant, gold-flecked amber which had taken a place in the annals of track gossip as the final expression of their owner's vivid intensity of being alive.

"A girl?" he queried.

"The girl," was the simple response. "I can't talk about her—come."

The other slipped a hand through his arm and they moved along the paddock. The huge oval of the mile course lay rose-tinted under the last light in the west.

The pink reflections painted the rising tiers of the grand stand and the clubhouse, gay with flags, wavered across the rows of private automobiles drawn along the fence, and played over the shifting, restless crowds.

As the two young drivers left the central meadow to cross the track, a blatant band broke into a popular air.

A murmur of interest followed the friends; eager eyes read the names of their cars, eager whispers communicated their identity, Delmar's bronze-curved head being particularly easy of recognition.

A policeman waved back those who pressed too close, as they passed up among the seats. Before one of the green boxes Laurence halted.

"Elsie, this is Louis Delmar," he announced. "Miss Leland and her brother, Delmar."

The young girl in white linen held out her hand, lifting to Delmar a fair, utterly feminine face of soft curves and delicate lights. Under her wide hat, her rippling blond hair parted across a candid brow that confirmed the innocent freshness of her red mouth; she was faintly flushed under the fire of attention leveled on the group, yet in spite of herself the same intentness of interest and admiration shone in the dark-blue eyes she raised to the racer's.

"I want to hope that both you and Mr. Laurence will win," she said. "But I don't know how."

Delmar murmured some reply, looking at her. When he turned to shake hands with her brother, a boy of nineteen, it was with the vague sensation of finding all life flat and savorless in comparison with the unattainable.

"You could have done that last year, when he and I were driving together," Laurence supplied. "Wish us both good luck this time; we'll need it."

"You meant that, last night—about your car?" she asked quickly.

He let his gaze fall to the training-camps opposite.

"I don't know what I meant," he confessed. "Nothing, I guess. I've been with Delmar for the last half hour; nobody is ever gloomy round him. But the car has spent the day smashing things."

"It's getting ready to smash records," comforted Delmar. "I'm afraid he is going to leave us behind him, Miss Leland, without a chance."

"Really?" she doubted.

"Really. You have seen motor races before?"

"Once; I saw you win the Long Island road race last spring."

"And I did not know!" he exclaimed involuntarily.

She regarded him, surprised, and the lovely color ran up to her forehead.

"I am glad you are helping Mr. Laurence to be himself," she said, after a moment.

"Those stories of his car—"

"His car is mechanically perfect," Delmar reassured quietly, and moved to speak with Jack Leland.

As a rebuke he accepted her return to Laurence's name—a reminder that his exclamation had verged too near gallantry for the betrothed of his friend.

Laurence took the chair beside Elsie, as the band again overwhelmed general speech. Leaning against the side of the box, Delmar met the boy's hero-worship in Leland's confident gaze, and listened to his eager chat. The towers of Coney Island lit against the sky; dusk stole up from the near-by sea.

"We must go back," Laurence recalled, reaching to touch the other's arm. "What are you dreaming about, old fellow? Jack hasn't spoken to you for five minutes."

Delmar snatched his steady regard from the girl's profile and gave the questioner his cordial smile.

"Not much, Laurie; listening to that music, I believe, and wondering what it was."

"Don't you know?" cried Leland mirthfully. "The last rage in New York?"

"I've been driving South."

The boy held up his finger and joined the air with his subdued tenor:

Gee, I wish that I had a girl,
Like the other fellows had.
Some one to make a fuss over me,
And cheer me up when I feel sad.

And I'm lonesome, awful lonesome,
Gee, I wish I had a girl.

Delmar's startled eyes encountered Elsie's.

"Let us go back," he urged abruptly.

"Laurence, I must go; I've been away too long now."

He shook hands with Leland, and Elsie also held out her hand to him.

"I do wish you good luck," she said with sweet frankness. "You don't think it is true—what they say of the black car?"

"No, surely. That would be to call it alive."

She shook her head, her eyes widening slowly; suddenly he realized how small and softly fragile she was.

"It seems, all those throbbing, pulsing cars seem alive. Please do not laugh; they seem alive to me. Good-by."

He looked across to where the black car crouched, as he descended the steps, but scarcely saw it. Laurence's farewell was not long; he rejoined the other before he reached the track.

"See what she gave me," he laughed breathlessly. "Delmar, there never was any one like her! Between you two a blue devil can't make good."

He held up a radiator cap on which perched a tiny grotesque image.

"A Billiken for good luck. Come help me put it on before you go to your camp."

"I will. But they're shouting for me."

The knot of mechanics scattered from round the black car at their approach. Laurence himself unscrewed the old cap, but as he leaned to put on the new, his wrist struck some projection of the car and the image was flung violently against the hood, the brittle metal snapping.

"My sleeve caught and jerked," Laurence explained, staring oddly at the broken charm. "It's—nothing; I'll get a new one to-morrow. Go on to your car, Delmar."

But Delmar moved nearer.

"You are not yourself to-night, Laurie," he declared, in a careful undertone. "Let Rivers take the first run."

"I'll do nothing of the kind. Besides, Rivers isn't fit. I want to let him rest that shoulder all he can. Good-by—good luck."

"I'm sure to win with Elsie watching," he added teasingly. "Why haven't you some one watching you, Louis Delmar?"

Already a step away, Delmar paused.

Oh, I wish that I had a girl—

he hummed under his breath.

The two faces bright with laughter and affection, they exchanged a last glance.

After a while the search-lights flared up around the track, the first cars flashed out to circle the course in mock practise and real rivalry.

Steadily the murmuring crowds flowed in through every channel. Sweeping out from the paddock, Delmar sought in vain to locate Elsie Leland and her brother in that dark, palpitant mass.

When the harshly imperious horn announced the start of the race, the driver of each of the shuddering, fire-touched machines drawn up in line had learned one fact; there was no car present so fast as Laurence's black racer. And Laurence knew it, also.

Raising his mask for some purpose, he showed a face flushed with excitement and anticipated victory just as a reporter's flashlight glared out. So much Delmar saw, then the start sounded and all thought was bent on the task at hand.

Three times the black car led the glittering group past the grand stand, then Delmar's exquisite skill snatched the lead upon the turns and held the advantage by repeating the feat at each curve.

The ten competing drivers were all veterans; there was no confusing novelty to them in the rush past the delirious crowds at the stand, the long stretches on the other sides

where only their own uproar broke the night hush, or the sliding plunge around the deadly curves on the east and west.

They started at half past eight. By midnight the lead had changed a dozen times; but Delmar was holding it when one of his tires blew out with a sibilant crack, sending him reeling to the side.

As he slowed down and his mechanic rose to signal their camp to make ready for repairs, the black car roared past, followed by the pack.

"Laurence is driving to gain laps," the mechanic called, as they limped, three-wheeled, into the paddock.

Delmar nodded coolly, though chafing at the delay. But when he stilled his car, when the swarm of eager workmen flung themselves upon it, the long shout of the people froze one and all to immobility.

The harsh alarm signal shrieked out over the tumult, mingling with the tinkle of the telephone in the hospital-tent.

"Number five is over on the east curve!" cried a man running by with a lantern.

"Laurence is through the fence over there!"

Delmar leaned against his machine, lights and shadows blurring.

"Get on with our tire," the mechanic ordered, curtly savage. "We can't help the smash over there, can we? Get busy—that black car was slated to kill somebody to-night."

He glanced at his chief as he spoke, well knowing, as all knew, of the friendship. But Delmar said nothing. When the tire was replaced, driver and assistant took their seats as before.

Only, instead of going direct to the track, Delmar halted before the returned ambulance.

"Laurence?" he asked, quite steadily.

The surgeon answered with equal brevity:

"Instantly killed. The man with him will get well."

"And the car?"

So unexpected was the question, so apparently callous, that the surgeon recoiled a step.

"I heard them say it could not be fixed for several days," he said dryly. "It will not be in your way to-night. Get out of the path, please."

Delmar pushed aside the folds of linen shading his face from the night wind; his lips lifted over his white teeth, his amber eyes hardened and gleamed through the dim light. He was silent, yet the other's gesture was of awed apology.

Every vivid line of expression made the young face a mask less of grief than concentrated hate—hate toward something on ahead in the dark. And as they drove out on the course, the mechanic saw Delmar was looking where men dragged the black car aside; looking with unflinching fixity.

At half past eight on the following night, Louis Delmar was announced as winner of the twenty-four-hour race.

The day after that, it was made public that he had signed a contract with the Swift Company to drive the black car in all events, taking the place held by Laurence.

It was inevitable that some reporter should catch the paddock gossip of the sinister car, sooner or later. A week after Laurence's death, the newspapers had made the superstition known all over the country.

People read, shrugged, or shuddered according to temperament, and might have forgotten, if they had been given time. But there was no time, for the black car gave none.

It was the racing season; from west to east, north to south, one event was catalogued after another.

"What contests do you think best to enter the machine for?" the delighted company had asked Delmar the day he signed with them.

"All," had been the laconic reply.

They did enter it for all of sufficient importance, and the game commenced.

Time after time Delmar drove the black car to victory on track or road. Race after race the car left behind it a record of maimed and wounded mechanics or disabled assistants. So surely as any one except its master driver took it out, even in the street, there was some disaster great or small.

But it never injured itself, and, though it brought Delmar within touch of death a dozen times, under his hand there was never an accident.

"That is magnificent, but it isn't racing," paraphrased a keen-eyed veteran of the tracks when he once saw Delmar descend from the victorious car after a six-hour road-race, too exhausted to stand alone.

And Delmar, hearing, answered:

"No, it's a duel."

There was no car so closely watched upon the courses; a morbid interest followed it. Men used to bet upon how long Delmar could last. He knew it, and laughed.

The next race at the beach was the first time the car entered for a twenty-four-hour

contest since Laurence's gruesome death at that place.

"You'll have to find some one to drive with me," was Delmar's only comment when he was told. "I can't keep the wheel for a night and a day."

"Of course," hastened the jubilant officials, ignoring the significance of the remark.

Since the victories were attached to the make, and the sinister personality to the single car, their profits were enormous from the affair.

A heavy gray fog overlay the countryside on the first morning Delmar went out to the beach motordrome. Driving was abandoned until the air should clear; there was little to do but think. It was early, and few of his companions had yet arrived.

Very listlessly Delmar surveyed the dim course, his eyes reflecting the somber chill of the atmosphere. Once he glanced at the east curve, and then the glint that crossed his expression was neither happy nor pleasant.

Some one was calling him, calling in a fresh, strong, young voice. Rousing abruptly, Delmar turned, and saw Jack Leland hurrying through the mist.

"I said we were your friends," the boy declared, resolute, yet a trifle shy, "and they let us come in. We saw you go in yourself. You don't mind? Elsie didn't want to come—but I made her."

"Mind?" echoed Delmar slowly. "Mind? You're only too good to remember me. Your sister—"

Across the stretch of wet grass he saw her again, her rose-colored gown flower-like against the dull background, her soft, candid face turned smilingly to him.

The tragic image of her that had walked his fancy by night fell from his sight forever; this serene reality rose up in place of his vision of her weeping for her lover. And the change left him dazed.

"You will forgive Jack," she apologized, almost timidly, as they met. "He so wanted to see you!"

"I never dared hope you were like this," he said. "I have pictured you every way except this since that night."

She drew her fingers away from his, but asked no explanation. Yet he felt her earnest regard, in his turn, and he stood silent to permit the inspection bareheaded in the damp air. He looked older than the intermediate time warranted; the brilliancy of his eyes under their heavy brows and lashes was not so certainly gay as before.

"You drive the same car here?" she questioned, after a pause.

"Yes; will you come look at it?"

If he were anxious to keep her there, he was unresistant. They walked slowly back Leland with them.

"To-day Jack had a holiday, and wanted to spend it on the seashore," Elsie said. "We meant to go to Coney Island before the crowds came. But in passing he saw you—"

"You spend his holidays together?"

"Always. We are chums."

She smiles up at the boy.

"I have no one except my friends of the track; no kith or kin."

"Jack and I have only each other and the aunt with whom we live. But we are more fortunate than you."

Before his reply a dark bulk loomed through the mist ahead; another step, and the black car crouched in their path.

"Have you found any one to drive in this twenty-four-hour race with you?" Leland asked presently.

"After a good deal of trouble, the company have," Delmar answered. "I ask no one to do that."

"It is true, then; all said of the car?" he pressed, avidly curious.

"All racing-machines have some mishaps. The newspapers make the most of this one's. But she is—unfortunate."

"You are not afraid," Elsie asserted, as one stating a fact dreamily wonderful.

"No. I sought the duel myself."

The duel!

The odd phrase held her attention, seeming to lend by inference an uncanny life and intelligence to the dark car.

There had been no one near them; when now a tall figure moved by, Delmar shook off reverie and called a summons.

"George, have you time to show an admirer your car?" he asked. "Mr. Leland wants to meet you."

As the other driver came over, he added the necessary presentation to Elsie. There was no need to say more or translate the request. Openly smiling, the mischief-loving George passed a hand through Leland's arm and bore him away.

But as the mist closed between, the whistled notes of a popular song floated mockingly back—

Gee, I wish that I had a girl—

Delmar moved sharply, looking at Elsie, but she gave no sign of having heard or

remembering. They were left quite alone, curtained round with gray air.

"You shivered—you are cold?" he said suddenly.

She shook her blond head, speaking as quietly and with uncertain breaks.

"No. I was thinking of all the people that car has hurt, and the stories of it. You do not believe those things, because you drive it. Or perhaps you do not care. They say that you laugh always and are gay—forgive me, but you do not look so happy."

"I miss Laurence all the time," he stated simply, and turned his face from the black machine.

Her soft mouth bent grievedly, but she did not shrink from the name as one reminded of the loss of all things.

"If I drive his car, it is because I hate it," he resumed, after an instant, the slip of steel on steel in his accents. "If it is a malignant thing striving to injure all who touch it, my greater evil will beats it down."

"If it is strong in hatred, I am stronger. I do not say this incredible fancy is true—I laughed at Laurence for hinting so—but I say I am that machine's master. I know it each time I take seat and wheel, and feel the thing in sullen submission to me."

He stopped, and his eyes met hers almost defiantly, as though he half expected to hear her ridicule him—or at the least to censure him kindly enough for foolhardiness. But she did not speak; her color faded a little, and in her eyes he read more than he dared to believe.

The mist shrouded them in its white dampness, and her voice seemed to come faintly to him.

"I think you are brave," she said. "And fine—to keep Frank Laurence's memory so green. If we all could have friends who would think of us—"

He interrupted her so suddenly that she was compelled to face him squarely. He could see there were tears in her eyes.

"And I've thought of you—Will you let me come to your home, and see if you can like me after you know me? There is a week before this race—do you think you could tell by then?"

Richly flushed, trembling, she looked up at him.

"I saw you at races before you saw me," she faltered. "I knew you thought I was engaged to Frank Laurence, that night, and I was sorry. I've read of every race you've been in since, and everything about you—if you come to see me, I shall be very glad."

He caught both her hands, and they stood motionless before one another. With the clearing weather, the myriad sounds of the paddock revived about them; down the line some one started a motor, cheerful voices called back and forth.

"To-night," he began happily.

They had much to learn of each other. It was new to Elsie to see Delmar in conventional dress instead of the khaki driving-costume; new to Delmar to see her in the gracious home setting of the little flat, where her utter femininity of type showed its best. And all learned was so delightful.

On the second evening they announced their betrothal to her aunt and young Leland. What was there to wait for, since they were certain of one another? They wanted all the world to know, in their mutual pride of conquest. And they passed at once into the closest companionship, seizing each hour to spend together.

All Delmar's old joyousness rose and poured its sparkling elixir along his veins, in those days, until men turned on the street to gaze after him, so vivid was his face and bearing, his very step.

Those who knew him and knew how deadly the plaything he took under his hand each hour on the track, watched him almost with superstitious awe.

Two days before the race, he came to the flat in the morning, khaki-clad once more.

"I've got to be at the course," he explained to the girl, as they stood in the tiny hall, her hands on his shoulders. "We won't see each other until night, unless you'll come with me. Will you? You can have the grand stand all to yourself."

"I'd love to. Jack is busy—"

"We don't need Jack, Miss Leland; we're engaged." He held up her left hand to show the diamond he had set there, mocking her with caressing eyes. "Come, I've brought my own roadster for you; do you know you're going to marry a professional driver, and you've never yet been in a motor-car with him?"

Laughing she ran to get her hat and veil.

It was a wonderful day. There were many of the racing drivers who saw the young girl in white untiringly watching Delmar with her proud, shining eyes, and some of them never afterward forgot. At noon Delmar took her to a seaside hotel for lunch, their first meal alone together; and when they returned she held quite a little reception as his companions came up.

Afterward she went back to watch his maneuvers with the black car.

When the afternoon was so far advanced that all the cars had retired to their training-camps, Delmar was startled by a light touch upon his arm.

"I came over with Mr. George," Elsie explained merrily. "Louis, I want something; I want you to take me round the course in your racing car."

"Elsie!"

"Why not? You need not go very, very fast. I want to feel that I have been where you go; to sit beside you like your mechanic."

"Please do not ask me that, Elsie."

"But why? Has the mechanic who rides there ever been hurt?"

"Not when he was with me," he admitted unguardedly.

"Well, I shall be with you." And as he still hesitated, "Louis, the reason I am not afraid to have you drive, is because I truly believe you are that car's master, as you said. If you will not take me I shall know you think it is too dangerous and that you really cannot control the car enough to trust me there—and I believe it will kill me to watch you race."

There was nothing more to be said.

"It is not that, but the feeling I cannot bear the thing to touch you," he yielded with reluctance. "I can take care of you, and the car, but I'd rather keep you apart. If I must—"

She nodded, her rose-petal face clear again, and went fearlessly toward the car.

"Crank it," Delmar curtly bade a workman standing by, and took his own seat before lifting Elsie beside him.

She took off her hat and tossed it on the grass, winding her veil round her face and fluttering golden hair; looking up at her lover with frankly adoring eyes the while.

"Do you do that to your mechanic?" she laughed, as he passed a strap about her slight waist, securing her to the seat.

Delmar smiled, but his expression was grave. Men came to tent doors as the black car passed, staring and pointing. George, turning in time to see, ran a few steps after them, shouting some impolitely candid re-monstration to Delmar.

Elsie waved her hand, enchanted, daring.

But she had enough to occupy her, when they slipped out on the smooth course. Comparatively slow as the pace Delmar set, it seemed furious to her. The deafening noise of the motor, the rush of air, the recollection

of the destruction this car had wrought, all left her dazed.

When they swung into the entrance of the paddock—for he made the circuit but once—she was very willing to be lifted down.

"You were frightened?" Delmar questioned anxiously, feeling her trembling.

She smiled, shaking her head.

"No, no; not with you! It was a little cold; the car went so fast!"

In fact, dusk was at hand, and a chilly wind rising from the ocean. He looked at her light gown, then went into the tent to procure a long coat of his own, while she pinned on her discarded hat.

"Your coat? How would I look!"

"Never mind; you had your way, now I have mine. Play it was next week, and we were married."

"Next week! Oh!"

He paused in wrapping the coat about her and caught her glance.

"Will you marry me next week, Elsie, when this race is over?"

"If you want me to," she surrendered exquisitely timid.

The drive home was the keystone of the day's built-up delights. The veriest novices in motoring passed Delmar's roadster as he loitered through the long parkway, one hand over both Elsie's while they made their radiant plans.

"You will not take me all away from Aunt Susy and Jack?" she ventured, once.

"I want them, too," he answered quickly.

"I have been lonely all my life; let me have kinsfolk now. I mean to play elder brother to your Jack, until he calls a halt."

"He worships you; from a respectful distance."

"Well, he'll have to come closer."

They were so happy, it was easy to laugh. When, home finally reached, they said good night in the hall, something like fever colored the cheeks and lips of both and burnished the golden-bronze of Delmar's strange eyes.

"You'll watch me, now, race Friday night?" he demanded.

"I will," she promised. "I know the car cannot hurt you."

There was a primeval innocence of passion in the kiss they exchanged at parting.

If the black car acknowledged one master it acknowledged no more. In upon Delmar's tranquilly breakfasting the next morning there burst an excited delegation.

"Come down to the track and test her out," implored the agitated manager of the

Swift Company. "She seems to be all right, but how can you tell till she's been on the track? Don't look like that, Delmar—we've got a lot on this race! I've bet a little on you, myself, on the side."

"It wasn't my fault," shakily asserted the other driver for the race. "She twitched, Delmar; I'd swear she did."

Delmar set aside his cup, surveying them. "Suppose you tell me what has happened," he suggested impersonally.

"He ran into the Alan car—"

"I did not. Delmar, I took the car out to practise—you know I have to do that sometimes—and a lot of the others were out. The Alan shed a tire and slowed up just ahead of me—I should have got by—I swear you devil car twitched herself!"

"You struck it?"

"He struck it," said the manager grimly. "He smashed in the Alan's tank from the rear and his exhaust exploded their gasoline all over the two men."

"Oh," as Delmar moved abruptly, "they are not badly hurt; Huston is in the hospital, but he'll drive the Alan to-morrow. I'm thinking about our car. It don't seem to be injured, but come try it; no one else can handle the machine."

Delmar rose unhurriedly, making no comment; but the glance he bent on his fellow driver was steady and very grave.

He was busy at the motordrome until late afternoon with the consequences of the affair, though the black car was unhurt. And it was there that a messenger brought him a note from Elsie.

He was not to come that evening, she wrote; no one would be in the little flat. Her aunt had insisted that they pay an annual visit due an out-of-town friend. But she would be at the Beach to watch him race on the next night; Jack would take her, since, of course, Louis himself would be busy all day.

She signed it, "Your loving fiancée, Elsie." And underneath: "I love you so much, dear."

Delmar read, sorely disappointed and chilled. He had counted on that last evening before the race, treasured the prospect of it all day as a golden undercurrent of thought.

He wondered why she could not have come to the Beach for the afternoon races, in which he did not take part, and so might have snatched some time with her.

But presently his confidence in her swept generously over the vague uneasiness; he re-read the note, touched his lips like a girl to that last naïve sentence, and went light-heartedly back to his affairs.

After all, Delmar had little time free before sunset again burned gorgeously behind the familiar, tumultuous scene at the motordrome. So contagious was his gaiety, so airily he tossed back and forth the light badinage current among these men who were little more than boys in years, and who lived in the keen air of danger, that all day his companions clustered round him in laughing groups.

But with approaching darkness they scattered to their own tents, and Delmar began to watch the box he had reserved for Elsie and her brother.

Continuously the crowds surged in, the automobiles purred to their places; the two he searched for did not come.

When the hour for the preliminary practise arrived, one of the other drivers crossed to where Delmar was preparing to start.

"What's your car's list for to-day?" he queried.

"One of the factory men broke his arm cranking it, and a few others caught scratches or bruises," was the cool reply. "Why?"

The other looked away.

"Nothing; only— Do you remember how good poor Laurence was feeling just before he started that night? Remember how he looked up laughing just before he put on his goggles?"

"Remember!" Delmar echoed slowly. He opened his coat and drew from an inner pocket a small leather book. "I've carried this ever since, George."

It was a fragment cut from a newspaper, that he gave; the last flashlight picture of Laurence at the starting-line, caught with all the bright triumph still on his young face. In silence the other man returned the worn paper and watched its return to its place.

"They're fixing the track with wet mud at the turns," he observed irrelevantly. "Take care of yourself, Delmar; you've been gay as a kid all day."

When he turned into the course, Delmar again sought Elsie's face among the people, but it was impossible to see across the dark.

A tremendous roar of applause greeted him, as always; the curious or morbid climbed on benches and seats to gaze on the evil car and its driver.

Half an hour later, when the racers were drawn in a throbbing row at the line, he looked again at the tiers of the grand stand. This time he saw Jack Leland, leaning over the front rail and waving his hat.

Delmar raised his hand in swift response, and the boy nodded vigorously, pointing back

to the shadowed boxes. Elsie was there, then!

Smiling, Delmar turned his glowing face to the inevitable flashlights, then snapped his mask in place and bent to the start—the signal that sent the cars in the flashing, tangled rush for the first curve.

It was Delmar's unspoken intention to keep his car until fatigue forced him to yield his place temporarily to his partner of the night. So long as physical endurance held, he would spare the other man, and the other cars. But he had expected to see Elsie, first. Now the desire to meet her smile and voice teased him monotonously, maliciously, destroying the exhilaration of the contest and undermining the ceaseless vigilance that was the price of life.

Near the end of the second hour the motor suddenly began to miss with an irregular series of gun-like reports; the black car shuddered, slackening speed. Delmar had no need to speak, his mechanic springing to dismayed investigation.

"She can't be getting the gas," he presently reported at the driver's ear. "Us for the control—the feed-pipe's choking!"

Delmar nodded, perhaps not sorry. As usual, the black car was the fastest on the course, and victory was practically a question of preventing accidents. On the next round he sent the machine into the paddock.

"A stopped pipe," he explained to the other driver, who ran out to meet him, while a swarm of mechanics flung themselves upon the car. "I will be back before it's ready again; I'm going over there."

"Your hand—"

Delmar glanced down at his right palm, a surface of open blisters.

"I lost my glove, and the car steers badly to-night," he said indifferently. "No—the mechanism is all right; I mean it pulls and jerks. You'd better let it alone until later."

"I'm willing," was the dry acknowledgment. "If it hadn't been for the prestige of driving with you, Delmar, I wouldn't have touched the brute. You're going to get that hand tied up, I suppose."

But Delmar did not stop at the white hospital-tent. Across the track and up an aisle of the grand stand he went, careless of the murmur following his passage. "Elsie, Elsie," his pulses were beating strongly.

Jack Leland rose to greet him, alone. "Elsie isn't here yet," he stated nervously, as Delmar halted, amazed. "She said to wish you good luck, for her, and tell you she'd come as soon as she could."

"Come! Why, where is she?"

"With Aunt Susy. She said to tell you not to be angry or think she didn't want to come. She wrote you that they were going away for a visit?"

"Yes."

"Well, then?"

Stupefied, Delmar passed his hand across his forehead. Elsie had stayed away, then, had not even written to excuse the breach of lover's faith? Only these second-hand messages on the night he played with death.

He turned and looked down at the great oval; its center a green meadow where the moonlight rested quietly, its edge the glittering, illuminated band around which circled the flying, crimson lights of the cars.

"How can she come here without you?" he demanded suddenly.

The boy stammered, faltering:

"With Aunt Susy—"

"That is a lie," Delmar flashed viciously out of his pain; the rich vitality of life in him making his rare anger fervent as his mirth or love.

"I—"

"What is wrong at your house, Jack Leland? What has come between Elsie and me?"

"Nothing."

Something in the tone impelled Delmar to catch the boy's arm and turn him toward the nearest electric light.

"You've been crying, you! For Heaven's sake, Jack—"

Leland broke down abruptly, dropping his head against the edge of the box.

"She said I was not to let you know, Delmar; she made me promise over and over. She said you could not drive if you were worried, and the car would kill you. I wanted to stay, but she sent me here."

"What has happened—speak out?"

"Pneumonia; she was too sick to see you yesterday, when she wrote. The day you had her out here with you, she got a chill. There's no chance for her, they say."

The dusk, and the black car—the picture rose before the listener. He saw the young girl shivering in her white frock as she smiled up at him, her golden hair fluttering in the damp wind.

When he turned back to Leland, there were scarlet drops where his teeth had bitten through his lip.

"There is a telephone below; come there," he bade, and dragged the other along.

Men stared strangely at the two as they passed. Leland fumbled the telephone pipe-

ously, his voice hoarse in indistinctness; Delmar had to remedy his mistakes.

"One—two—seven—seven?" he asked at last. "It's Jack. Elsie?"

Delmar averted his face from the light. Almost at once the boy hung up the receiver.

"It's about over," he communicated brokenly. "You couldn't get there in time if you started for the house even now. And, she's unconscious."

Every fiber of the man's body leaped aching to attempt that hopeless dash for the city, to cast aside all for the chance of one more warm touch of her; every instinct of the racing driver's honor and loyalty rose imperiously up to command his stay. Delmar gasped for breath as the struggle wrenched him.

It was some fifteen minutes since he had left the paddock. Now, as he leaned against the pillar, a familiar sound pierced the mists of unbearable pain—the Gatling-like explosions of his own motor. His men had finished, and were starting the machine.

Delmar stood erect, and without farewell or explanation sprang to cross the promenade and track. Jack called after him, but he did not hear.

The substitute driver had the black car at the paddock gate when Delmar met him.

"She was ready, I had to take her," he shouted, above the roar of the motor. "What?"

"Get off," Delmar repeated distinctly.

The paddock judge and several men had come hurriedly over, but he did not heed them. The driver obeyed without remonstrance, until Delmar took his seat. Then, recovering, he cried out sharply:

"Delmar, you're not going unmasked? And your hand—you've no bandage or glove!"

Delmar answered nothing. His lip lifted slightly over his white teeth, his eyes gleamed in the dark.

"You struck foul through her," he was saying, unheard of any one. "Blood-hungry, are you?"

His mechanician deliberately hooked the other's mask in place, unbidden, as they shot into the course; he had accompanied Delmar in every race for two years, but he was afraid now.

"Jack Leland, crumpled wretchedly in the seat he had crept back to from sheer horror of being alone in the dark, was roused later by a hand on his shoulder.

"What's wrong with Delmar?" some one asked. "I'm George, you know—my car's

in the camp for an hour's repairs. Where's your sister?"

"Dying," the boy choked, clutching at companionship.

The grasp on his shoulder tightened.

"He's driving to the devil. He has broken his own five-mile and mile records already. Look—"

The three leading cars were tearing down the course, almost abreast; the black car leaping rather than rolling, its driver's uncovered, bronze head Navarre-like in the center of danger.

The crowd rose, delirious, frantic; waving flags and handkerchiefs, shouting Delmar's name.

Just as the racers swept past the grandstand, the band burst into melody, and a score of hilarious voices caught up the air in pure exuberance:

Gee, I wish that I had a girl—

The black car swerved sharply on the turn; for an instant Delmar's hand or eye failed.

There was an appalling crash as his front wheel shattered against the rear of the nearest car, followed by a second crash, yet louder, as his machine turned completely over and splintered into a mere litter of fragments on the track. The other car reeled on and then stopped, scarcely harmed.

The long cry of the horrified people died out, to leave utter silence save for the roar of the cars halting around the course.

When Jack Leland could raise his head again, the crowd was still standing.

"Don't look," warned George's strained voice beside him. "It was all over at once for him and his mechanician. Best so; they had no chance."

But the boy did look, and saw what red ruin lay beneath the frightful wreck men were raising.

"He said it was a duel," he whispered drearily, his head turning with shock. "I guess the car won."

The driver of many races started to the defense of the fellow driver lying out there on the roadway.

"No! That heap of splinters was the black car; mastered now. Delmar won, or tied."

A fluttering night wind stirred past, damp from the sea. After a moment Jack spoke:

"I guess you're right. The car tried to get between Elsie and him, but they went together, after all. Yes, Delmar won."